

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 18, 2016
Romans 1:1-7
Powerful Words to Prepare our Hearts
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Dear Friends in Christ,

Words are powerful. Words can lift you up, or, knock you for a loop. Words cut right to the heart. “Your tests were negative.” “We are all coming home for Christmas.” Or, “I don’t like you anymore.” “We have to let you go.” Two words on the plus side come to mind in connection with the Son of God’s advent to be our Savior on the cross. Those words are grace and peace.

Grace and peace are **Powerful Words to Prepare our Hearts**. We pastors use grace and peace to prepare your hearts to hear our sermons. The angels prepared the shepherds hearts to meet Jesus with those words, peace on earth, and God’s favor, which is grace, resting on one and all. The apostle Paul used those two words to prepare his readers for his inspired letters.

Let’s look at those words as we get ready to celebrate the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ. “Grace to you” that sent the world a Savior. “Peace to you” that comes through that Savior’s work.

The power of a word to prepare the heart comes in part from the reliability of its source. “Grace to you” is the Word of God reliable sources have proclaimed. The prophets of old proclaimed it. We have their words in the Holy Scriptures. As I mentioned, the angels proclaimed it Christmas night. Paul was a reliable source because he was “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.”

God chose all of those reliable messengers to proclaim his undeserved love to us lost sinners in Christ Jesus, our perfect Substitute. Grace is a powerful word because of its meaning. God’s eternal Son became a true human descendant of David through Mary. His resurrection from the dead proves that he is God who in holiness overcame sin and guilt and death for the world. We are loved by God. He has called us to be his holy people.

With his words “Grace to you” Paul did not mean to say that he hoped God would give us his underserved love. The apostle is preaching the good news that God’s love in Christ Jesus our Savior has come to us in the gospel. That gospel declares us holy in God’s sight so that we can be his own.

Paul had experienced that grace in the flesh as God forgave his previous life of opposition to the gospel. God not only forgave Paul but called Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles sharing Christ Jesus with them. It was through his message that Paul had called the Romans “to belong to Jesus Christ.” It is through the Word of Christ God has called us to belong to Jesus Christ as well.

“Grace to you.” These are powerful words to prepare our hearts to worship humbly and freely our Savior at his birth. God not only has forgiven all my sin by the payment of his Son’s holiness on the cross. God has called us to the “obedience that comes through faith.” We can translate that the obedience that is faith. Faith is obedience to God’s will not to have other gods. God the Holy Spirit has created faith in Christ so we possess all the benefits of forgiveness- new spiritual life and eternal salvation in heaven. There is power then in Paul’s words “Peace to you” that comes through that Savior’s work.

The declaration of peace is a powerful word. The word Peace appeared as the banner headline on newspapers around the world at the end of the world wars. We still remember the end of those

wars. Peace is the cessation of enmity and division. At the time of Jesus' birth the Pax Romana, the peace Rome brought to the world, gave the gospel easier and quicker access to the nations of the earth.

"Peace to you" is the reconciliation and cessation of enmity between God and us through the mediation of Jesus our Savior. Peace is a powerful word that relieves our guilty consciences. Peace quiets our questions when we do not understand the Lord's specific plan for us. Peace holds in check our fear of death. This is the peace the world cannot give. It comes only through Jesus' holiness and sacrifice.

I am now right with God through Jesus. David's son and David's Lord has conquered all my enemies who were out to destroy me. Again, Paul pointed the Romans to Jesus' resurrection as living proof of that victory. It is in that peace we have with God which transcends all human understanding that we are able to be at peace with one another.

We pray for peace among nations. We pray for and work for peace among the members of our families and our congregations. It is through the "peace to you" that comes through that Savior's work that we are able to conquer our enmity and divisions and be at peace with ourselves and with each other. That peace expressed to others will bring great blessing to us as well as to them. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God."

Words have power. The words grace and peace lift up our hearts. Those words do not cut us to the heart but mend our hearts. Keep those words in your minds and hearts as you prepare this week to gather at our Savior's manger bed, and as you live daily in the power of grace and peace to you. Amen. <SDG>